

## Listening to Life Speaking

Review of

*Vatican II: The Sacred Liturgy and the Religious Life*

By Thomas Merton [4 CDs]

Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra

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Reviewed by **Gray Matthews**

“This is big. This is the thing. This is it. This is really gonna go. This is what’s cooking!” And this is how Thomas Merton excitedly begins a set of conferences on Vatican II and the promise of sweeping reforms in the 1960s. If you have been looking for some fresh expressions of Merton’s, you might appreciate listening to this set of recorded conferences to the novices. In this review I will briefly cover the general content and Merton’s aim with these particular conferences, but I want to diverge from a standard review model of *what* Merton is saying in order to concentrate a bit more on the experience of listening to *how* he is saying it. In other words, I want to review Merton’s voice in a way – as expressed life – to distinguish hearing words from hearing a person, and I think these particular conferences lend themselves to a wonderful opportunity to hear Merton as his life is being expressed through him – not by him, but through him by the Life that speaks through life itself.

I have listened to a great number of Merton’s recorded conferences over the years but this particular set stands out to me as very special for two primary reasons, both unanticipated, and both having to do with what one can hear in his voice more than in the content of his talks. First, I was struck by a form of Merton’s expressiveness that reveals the enthusiasm of deep innocence, a remarkable earnestness in the vibrancy of one who is alive with genuine hope. You hear this voice of enthusiasm in the first four of the seven conferences in the set. The second trait that captured my attention was the ease in his speaking, one that I had not heard before, a very palpable relaxation of Merton’s spirit that is conveyed so effortlessly, so happily, which you can hear in the final three conferences.

The conferences are offered in a set of four CDs grouped under the theme: “Vatican II: The Sacred Liturgy and the Religious Life.” For some reason, the title of this set did not interest me very much, yet because I was familiar with the long-standing difficulty of labeling Merton’s talks to the novices, I reserved the right to be pleasantly surprised. And I was.

The first four talks were given between December 16-26, 1963 on the subject of “The Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy.” The final three conferences were delivered a little over a year later, between January 17 and February 7, 1965. Besides the central event of Vatican II creating the thematic focus of these two series of conferences, there are two other major events that significantly contextualize Merton’s discourse at this time: (1) the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and (2) Merton’s move into the hermitage at Gethsemani. All three events are interrelated in these talks, directly and indirectly, but more importantly, they are interrelated in an organic expressiveness which you can hear in Merton’s voice – not the tone, but the spirit of his voice. The entire sequence of talks in this set looks like this:

- I. The Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy [discs #1 and #2]
  - 1. A Document of Faith (12/16/1963)
  - 2. Liturgy, Faith, Redemption and Contemplation (12/18/1963)
  - 3. Theology of Worship and the Presence of Christ (12/20/1963)
  - 4. Mass Media and the Church (12/26/1963)
- II. Schemata on Religious Life [discs #3 and #4]
  - 5. Redefining the Theology of Monasticism (1/17/1965)
  - 6. True Renewal in Monasticism (1/31/1965)
  - 7. A Monastic Life for the Whole World (2/7/1965)

Fr. Anthony Ciorra provides a brief introduction at the beginning of disc one. One by one, the conferences build almost dramatically and lead the listeners from the larger institutional concerns of the reforming Church to specific implications for monastic life to the essence of being a live human being open to the Spirit of Life. Merton’s excitement throughout the conferences hinges on the question of how much one may be helped to stand on one’s own feet, free from the entrapment of external structures and the laws of attachment, and then what happens when we all do that together. We can do this, he seems to be saying to the novices under his care – we can do this and we have got to do this!

What kept amazing me to hear throughout the first four talks was a profound innocence and genuine hope in Merton’s voice, as well as a hint of reserve. I thought: would people believe this today? Would people understand his enthusiastic hope not as optimism or idealism but as real? I am not sure it is possible for many people these days to shed the deadening layers of cynicism following the assassinations in the 1960s, the post-Nixon White House, the constant stream of scandal-gates, and the postmodern deconstruction of any and all foundations for doing anything. One may be tempted to misread Merton as naïve, as a “true believer,” but I daresay one would miss the expression of life itself in his speaking. Merton was hopeful and wide awake, and he knew the foolishness of the cross. He refused to be numb and he refused to mock the dignity of hope. He is quite serious about it in these talks, and quite convincing.

The basis of each of these conferences stems from Merton’s use of various documents sent to him by others – essay drafts, proposals, letters, news articles – all of which were written either to influence or to report on the thinking behind what would eventually become Vatican II discourse. Merton’s interest throughout is on the thinking behind the language that will eventually become Church teaching. He strives to sensitize the novices to a mindset reflected in and by language. Each

conference becomes a contemplative lesson and exercise in receptiveness as well as responsiveness. In other words, his chief desire is for the novices to become able to read or take or understand what is being communicated tacitly as well as stated directly. He is teaching contemplative listening. Merton is trying to uncover the working principles of how and where the Church is going to go. He sounds energized by the whole process and excited to help the novices realize how alive their involvement in this process of reform must be. He is seeking to clarify what is happening, distinguishing what is of faith and what is of historical note only, always with emphasis on the need to read and adapt to the needs of our time.

Gradually, as one listens, it becomes clear that Merton is modeling contemplative criticism in trying to help the novices discover how to contemplate *what is going on* for themselves. As you listen to Merton speaking, you hear a voice pleading beyond the words: “See!” The word itself – see – is typically a filler word in Merton’s oral style (similar to how other speakers will repeat “uh,” “um,” “you know”). But Merton’s habit here, in these conferences, seems to fit the occasion quite well. The reiteration of emphasis: “See!”

The final three conferences are, to me, worth the price of the whole set and are not only the dramatic highlight of this series, but are among the most exciting talks I’ve ever heard Merton deliver. He opens these conferences (in January 1965) by praising a work by the monk-poet Brother Antoninus [William Everson, 1912-1994]. Merton had not read the work but had, instead, heard a recording of Antoninus reading it and recommended it highly to the novices as a superlative example of contemplative criticism. Merton refers to this piece in his journal as “a remarkable and sensitive poetic insight into the state of the American mind – better than anything I know” (*Dancing in the Water of Life* 192). Antoninus’ reflection offers a contemplative reading of the JFK assassination and cultural grief in the form of a mythic critique, an interpretation of a historical event symbolizing deep spiritual truths. Merton agrees with Br. Antoninus’ perspective and even expands the critique by adding some of his own poetic insights into the ongoing meaningfulness of the nation’s situation. Antoninus’ piece, “The Tongs of Jeopardy: Reflections on the Death of President Kennedy,” was privately published at first and then printed in the March 1964 issue of *Ramparts Magazine* (which can now be read online at: [www.unz.org/Pub/Ramparts-1964q1-00003](http://www.unz.org/Pub/Ramparts-1964q1-00003)). Given Merton’s ecstatic celebration of “The Tongs of Jeopardy” at the beginning of this conference, I would think Merton readers would be very interested in it, thus making it attractive for inclusion in a future edition of *The Merton Annual*, if possible.

Merton rallies the novices around the discipline of contemplative criticism as exhibited in Antoninus’ meditation, which the poet concludes by questioning the facts of a historical event as bound strictly and merely by chance, choosing instead to praise God for having “made for us one of those hinges by which we as a people may turn and gaze deep into the reality of what we are, and thereby acquire an essential discernment into our shaken heart” (online *Ramparts* edition 7). Throughout all seven conferences, Merton is calling precisely for just this: “essential discernment.”

And yet, his voice is not urgent or desperate, but extremely relaxed, joyous, playful, contented. I have never heard Merton sound so happy. As I listened to him, I almost felt like crying because he sounded so happy. And I marveled at how a person, in this day and age, about to turn 50 years old, could sound so wondrously happy and not let up on that hinge to “gaze deep into the reality of what we are.” I cannot help but attribute the contentment in his voice to the fact that he had just received

permission to move into the hermitage three months earlier (one month before this conference, Merton had cooked his first meal in the hermitage, and just a little over a week after the final conference in the series, he would be able to turn on the electric light).

The heart of these final talks, as well as the entire set, is the contemplative experience of the Spirit of Life in and at the core of our being. The essential discernment he calls for is to listen to the silent voice, that divine spark, that *point vierge* deep within. The vibrancy of the deeper life, amid whatever changes the world or the Church become involved in, is what Merton is so happy to remind us is a listening life. But this life can be blocked, Merton tells the novices, by inertia and illusion. And so, the hope of the reforms is to help us find fresh approaches to the spiritual life, not simply in new formulas and procedures, but the freshness of the Holy Spirit speaking within us all.

The freedom in Merton's voice in these last three conferences reminded me of his beautiful essay on *parrhesia*, "free speech," which he had penned a few years earlier in *The New Man*, a freedom of expression that "comes to us in the terrible yet healing mercy by which God gives us the courage to approach Him exactly as we are" (96).

Merton concludes by identifying the truth that people who come to the monastery expect to find, which is this: "They are looking for a real person, to begin with. The one thing that we absolutely owe to the rest of the human race is that every one of us has got to be real. This is our first obligation, and practically speaking our only obligation. But this is really it." He extends this obligation to the community – it must be real community life or it is not the gospel. Whatever fosters this, Merton teaches, is real renovation in the monastic life, real responsibility, which means a real stake in each other being real, being honest, telling people what is in your heart. Whatever obstructs this real freedom of speech, he says, has simply got to go. In sum, Merton is saying that the living reality of the communication of life, and not merely messages and conferences about it, is the heart of true renewal. Listening to Merton through these talks is a renewal of listening itself.